

The Beast

By [REDACTED]

Inspired by The Eagles' "Hotel California."

(Recommended that you read this with that playing in the background)

As pinpricks of light force their way through the great cloth of the sky above, the magnificent ember which illuminates the desolate highway and solitary structure below drowns in a sea of pastel-washed outcroppings and dunes to the west. I regard the chestnut and vermilion-hued screams reaching out along the sandy horizon with a tinge of empathy, taking in the latest set of celestial death throes a glance at a time, through narrow slits in the tower wall, as I make my way up the spiraling staircase. My gut sinks further towards my feet with every step I mount. The destination that awaits me lies in the uppermost cell of this structure, this monument to deception, this strange sort of symbolic sanatorium masquerading as an asylum of a more appealing sort. Only I and The Woman can distinguish the reality in this haze of illusion.

There is no choice in my ascent. I pad slither, flap and flop onwards and upwards, not driven by personal preferences, but rather by an irresistible compulsion. The eternal shifting of my form - now a wolf; something with scales; now hooves, fangs, and feathers - complicates the matter as always. A leg is set on a step, only to retreat into my torso. A serpentine wriggle grows ineffective as my entire self shrinks and spouts seraphic extensions from the spine. Wings evaporate mid-flap, depositing me to tumble roughly, if briefly, while I adapt to six slim carapaced legs. Still, I make progress far too fast for my liking. If my will was unchained, I'd gladly never reach the top. Perhaps instead I'd journey outside to lie in soft and still pleasantly warm sand with the lizards and cacti, and count the emerging stars. Yet that will never be.

In my futile duskdream, I almost miss the fact that I've arrived at the summit of these steps; a simple landing with an unobstructed doorway lies directly ahead. There's no need for a door, when any of us here, but perhaps The Woman, would welcome an obstacle to entering the chamber ahead with sobs of wet gratitude. The dying gasps of the sun mingle with the brightly rising lunar light to display the centerpiece and sole focus of the cylindrical chamber my means of massive unglassed windows, through which a slight breeze blows with an otherworldly low moan. Filling nearly the entirety of the space is a massive round table, lacking any seats. Gold-crusted bottles with a faint sheen of condensation over the pink fluid within rest in chilly and ornate frozen cauldrons, releasing sparse vapors into the air. One of these bottles of beckoning beverage sits between every table setting at its non-existent seat, each places consisting of naught but a crystal glass, a milky china dish, an intricately folded length of crimson silk serving as a napkin, and a blade differing in style for each place, some long and slim, others more stubby, serrated daggers. In the center of the table, a silver platter complete with oversized carving fork and long serrated knife mocks me. All of this rests on a sterile, snow-white tablecloth covering the ancient yet strong wood below with a stunningly bright show of false innocence.

As always, my compulsion forces me to climb upon the silky, shimmering surface and lie in the center, the instruments placed there digging into my underside. As soon as I settle, I begin to hear the thuds of the crowd ascending the passageway with much greater ease than I had. Soon, they enter- The many familiar men and a new arrival, fellow prisoners here, and The Woman, bringing up the rear. Each one displays a style of fashion or comfort spanning the past century, yet each the same one they've worn since the day of their arrival. Only one ever changes- tonight, The Woman has chosen a sweeping dress of sanguine silk that accentuates every curve and bend of her enticing figure. They circle the table silently, save The Woman, who moves to stare out at the landscape below. As her eyes sweep across the scene, the gutturally whimpering breeze causes her short train to ripple gently, shimmering scarlet in her wake.

The clothes of the men are not the only constant in their appearance; the ravenous and terrified glare deep within their eyes is invariable as well, and now accentuated by the varying slivers of steel, colder than the champagne before them, clenched in white-knuckled fists as they stand barely restrained behind designated places. The woman has trained her playthings well. She spins suddenly to face them, a signal which grants them a minute degree of release. Not bothering with manners fit for the setting, they rush upon me with wild abandon, scrambling onto the table, Dishes and glasses and napkins clattering and shattering and floating to the floor in their frenzy. I watch, as if above, while they slash and stab at my corporeal carcass. No hot pain is felt, no blood of mine falls...but the cold of the steel sinks into my beastly soul. Turning my gaze up to the mirrored ceiling...

*...the perpetual truth becomes entirely visible to my eyes without the effort it usually takes. I am not settled in the center of that altar to vanity, but rather shattered among each of them, deep inside. Spread haphazardly across the table, they slash and stab not at a physical representation of me, but at *themselves*, slashing and staining the immaculate cloth of the table a dark and spotted bloody red. Small pools form in the pockmarks of the scarred mahogany beneath the shroud of textile, splashes of that sticky fluid of life and death concurrently tracing the ancient wounds of the wood. My ghostly eyes meet those of The Woman. She smiles, but she cannot hide the truth and terror within even her. I see the sole drop of blood running down her wrists, sliding down her hand, pooling at the tip of her ring finger, and falling to the floor with an inaudible yet earth-shaking effect. Even she is not immune to me. I am in even her, gnawing at the armor around her souls from the inside as well.*

They cannot separate themselves from me.

They cannot stop me.

They cannot kill me.

For I am the Beast

Within.

Them.

All.

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